

# **Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact for the Sanpoil Project**

USDA Forest Service  
Republic Ranger District  
Colville National Forest  
Ferry County, Washington

## **Introduction**

The Sanpoil project is needed to promote forest health and resiliency, protect and promote water quality, watershed function and aquatic habitats, and to support infrastructure and jobs in the Tri-County area. The Sanpoil Environmental Assessment (EA) documents the analysis of the proposed action along with five alternatives that were considered but eliminated from detailed study including the rationale for their elimination.

## **Responsible official**

The responsible official for the Sanpoil project is Travis Fletcher, District Ranger for the Republic Ranger District. The Republic Ranger District is located at 650 East Delaware Avenue Republic, WA 99166. Travis Fletcher can be contacted at 509-775-7415 during normal office hours which are 7:30 am to 4:00 pm Monday to Friday, excluding holidays, or by cell phone at (509) 207-9339.

Below is a description of the decision for the Sanpoil project, rationale for the decision, the Finding of No Significant Impact, and the expected timing for project implementation.

## **Changes to the Environmental Assessment**

Some changes were made between the draft EA and the final EA in order to achieve compliance with the revised Colville National Forest Land Management Plan (LMP), in response to comments received during the 30 day draft EA comment period, and to improve clarity. The shaded fuel break treatment definition was updated in the EA and Fuels report and additional information regarding shaded fuel breaks was also added to the Fuels reports in order to add more clarification regarding shaded fuel break treatments, including those occurring in Inventoried Roadless Areas (IRA). The Management Areas table (EA table 1), Acres of Treatments table (EA table 3) and Unit Treatment Table (EA Appendix C) were updated due to changes in management area designation and/or treatment acres. The Sanpoil design elements (EA table 6) and Standard Practices tables (EA Appendix B) were updated based on specialist input (updated specialist reports) in order to comply with the LMP. Section 3 Environmental Consequences was also updated based on specialist input (updated specialist reports) in order to comply with the LMP. Unit numbers were added to the Silvicultural and Fuels treatment maps

(EA figures 6 and 7) in response to comments. The Inventoried Roadless Areas and Land Management Plan Management Areas map (EA figure 2) was updated with the LMP management area designations. Other minor changes occurred in order to increase clarity or improve the overall flow of the EA.

## **Decision and Rationale for the Decision**

I have decided to implement the proposed action alternative (Alternative 2) as described in the Sanpoil project EA with a change to the proposed aquatic organism passage (AOP) culvert upgrades, see page 26 of the EA. I have decided to implement the two planned AOP culvert upgrades in a separate categorical exclusion (CE) with implementation occurring in the summer of 2020. I came to this decision due to concerns with timing for the AOP culvert upgrades having the potential to impact implementation of other activities for the Sanpoil project. Also, by using a CE, an additional culvert that is found outside of but near to the Sanpoil project area would be able to be upgraded.

Specific activities included in the Sanpoil decision can be reviewed in the EA on pages 15 to 27. Based on my review of the EA, the specialist reports, and other information in the project record, and a thorough consideration of comments received from the public both during the formal comment period and the scoping period, I feel confident that this project is an important step to address the purpose and need in the Upper Sanpoil River, Middle Sanpoil River and Hall Creek watersheds. I've used this information as well as information provided during consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, discussions with the Colville Confederated Tribes and meetings with interested parties like Ferry and Stevens County, the Northeast Washington Forestry Coalition, and local elected officials to arrive at a decision that I feel best promotes forest health and resilience, protects water quality, promotes watershed function, improves aquatic habitats, and supports infrastructure and jobs in the Tri-County area while limiting unwanted effects.

The location of the Sanpoil project weighs heavily into my decision to implement the proposed action due to the Sanpoil project bordering the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation. Due to such proximity to tribal trust lands the Sanpoil project is being proposed under the Tribal Forest Protection Act (TFPA). Restoration efforts within the project area are intended to increase forest health and resilience in order to create a balanced landscape that is more capable of withstanding wildfire, insect, and disease disturbances. These restoration efforts would comply with TFPA guidance as they would decrease the potential for wildfire, insect, and disease disturbances that pose a risk to tribal trust lands. Consideration of these risks, and recognition of the potential threat Forest Service lands pose to neighboring tribal lands influenced my desire for fuels management projects within Inventoried Roadless Areas (IRAs) that are near the southern border of the project area and along key access routes for tribal trust lands. Many of these treatments would allow for increased firefighter safety by improving ingress and egress routes and fuels management activities would provide an adequate place for firefighters to begin engaging and suppressing wildfires when they occur in these areas. Providing for better and safer firefighter access while reducing the amount of forest fuels and tree canopy connectivity would afford the Forest Service the ability to manage fire differently on this landscape than if these treatments weren't implemented. In addition to being able to manage fire differently, being able to implement fuels management activities within and adjacent to IRAs would also allow the

Forest Service to reduce the likelihood that wildfires will burn onto tribal lands and this outcome directly relates to the objectives of the TFPA. Therefore, accomplishing the objectives of the Sanpoil project will allow the Colville National Forest to work with the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation to implement treatments along this shared border. I feel that this is an additional benefit to accomplishing these treatments as I consider it vital to the overall mission of the Colville National Forest to foster relationships with a variety of collaborative partners that will allow the Colville National Forest to accomplish the greatest public good on the 1.1 million acres of National Forest land under our care.

I would like to discuss some of the comments received during the draft EA comment period due to some consistent themes among commenters. Please see the Public Involvement and Scoping section below for more information about comments received, and how to view letters sent to and from the Forest Service. Roads and treatments on the landscape were the two themes that were most consistent among commenters.

Comments received regarding roads showed concerns with the ability of the Forest Service to maintain the road system within the project area, concerns with regulatory compliance, and issues with methods of decommissioning roads. A data-driven scientific approach was used by the interdisciplinary team (IDT) to categorize roads based on risk to resources, and net benefit of a road to current and future management activities. The travel analysis completed for this project identified a road system that is adequate for land management activities associated with the Sanpoil project and beyond. Assessing the transportation system with this method was used to comply with regulatory requirements and ensure that the Forest Service could strike a balance between accomplishing this project, retaining adequate access for future management goals, providing access to Forest Service lands for the public, and limiting impacts to natural resources. After project implementation, the road system will provide an appropriate balance between use and protection, while still meeting regulatory requirements. Therefore, I have no concerns with how the project will impact the road system within the project area and feel that it will provide an appropriate level of access for management activities and the public in order to create the greatest public benefit.

Comments received included concerns that the EA did not adequately analyze or determine to what extent old temporary roads that exist on the landscape contribute to undesirable environmental effects, or to what extent these templates need to be actively restored. Section 2.3.3 of the EA describes the extent and general range of conditions of these templates. Information on the location of existing templates derived from LIDAR was completed only a few years ago, and efforts to understand issues and systematically restore problem segments are ongoing and evolving. Generally speaking, existing road templates that are problematic are those templates that intersect a stream or lie within or riparian areas adjacent to a stream. The Forest Service may use a variety of tools to accomplish restoration of non-system road segments. This may include the use of task orders in stewardship contracts, separate engineering contracts for restoration, or other tools and processes yet to be determined.

While potentially informative, I do not expect, nor has my team indicated, that additional surveys of temporary roads would reveal significant environmental effects or would change the project proposal. My decision is to authorize restoration, where needed, on any segments of existing

temporary road within the Sanpoil project area. Which segments receive active restoration treatments will be determined based on access, need, funding, and condition. Restoration may take place at any time during the life of this NEPA document and would be coordinated with other management activities.

Comments were also received that had opposing views for the Sanpoil project. Some commenters called for commercial treatments in old growth areas of the forest while others felt that commercial treatment should not occur in old growth. Some comments were also found to mislabel old growth areas that are not considered old growth by the Forest Service. Forest Service designated old growth areas will not be receiving commercial treatments but may have fuels treatments occurring that are found to benefit the old growth characteristic. The old growth management allocation is not part of the revised LMP, therefore areas that were identified as old growth now fall under a different management area. However, I will not consider adding commercial treatments for these areas even where the change in management area designation would allow this due to the point we are in the planning process.

Other opposing views were expressed concerning effects to wildlife. Some comments focused on potential negative effects to wildlife through the creation of openings and thinning treatments that would reduce cover, while others proposed that openings and thinning treatments could benefit wildlife due to increases in forage. During the planning process, an interdisciplinary approach was used in order to ensure that treatments limit or avoid negative impacts to a variety of resources including but not limited to wildlife. Proposed actions on the landscape were found to comply with the LMP as well as other laws and regulations that drive the decision-making process. The project area has a variety of conditions and stand types that will require different treatment prescriptions in order to accomplish the purpose and need of the project, and ultimately move this area towards a more restored state. Therefore, I find no need to alter any planned treatments due to comments received as the proposed treatments for the Sanpoil project will satisfy law and regulation requirements while accomplishing the purpose and need for the project and resource protection within the project area.

One group commented that the proposed shaded fuel breaks were not consistent with the restoration goals described in the purpose and need (EA section 1.2). Additionally, there was some concern that these linear features were not, in and of themselves, restoration. Shaded fuel break treatments are described under section 2.2.2 of the EA and in the Fuels report (project record). These strategically placed treatments are aimed at reducing fuels along key ingress and egress routes and reducing fuel loading along roads. In the event of a wildfire, fire managers may be able to use these treatments to tailor more effective suppression strategies that have a higher likelihood of success while providing for increased firefighter safety. These shaded fuel break treatments will be thoughtfully implemented in a non-emergency situation and the effect of accomplishing this work in the Sanpoil project will allow for a more effective fuels treatment than what would occur during wildfire suppression efforts. In some instances, shaded fuel breaks may increase the likelihood that wildfires could be managed at scales that more closely mimic the mid-sized patches of disturbances, which help to introduce important heterogeneity into a landscape rather than large wildfires that burn entire watersheds. Furthermore, shaded fuel breaks may help a forested landscape be more resilient to disturbance events by increasing the likelihood that some areas remain relatively intact and without large scale tree mortality. My

decision includes shaded fuel break treatments as part of an overall strategy to set the project area on a trajectory where natural processes can play a role in the system without causing large-scale mortality.

## **Other alternatives Considered**

In addition to the selected alternative, I considered five additional alternatives that were eliminated from detailed study. These alternatives were developed in response to concerns raised during scoping. The five alternatives involved using an insect and disease categorical exclusion analysis, large-scale prescribed burning, no new temporary roads, Pacific Northwest trail tie to Republic, and to drop treatments planned in the Inventoried Roadless Area. Pages 14 and 15 of the EA describe these alternatives considered, but not analyzed in detail.

I also considered the no action alternative (Alternative 1). I found that the no action alternative would not accomplish the purpose and need that was identified for the Sanpoil project, and in most cases would worsen the condition for resources over time. More information regarding the effects of this alternative and a comparison of effects for Alternatives 1 and 2 can be found in section 3 of the EA and in specialist reports (project record).

## **Public Involvement**

On July 9th, 2014 the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation requested that the FS enter into an agreement under the TFPA to plan activities in the Sanpoil project area. On October 24, 2014 the Pacific Northwest Region's Regional Office accepted the TFPA proposal. Section 106 tribal consultation was initiated with all tribes on December 9, 2016; coordination with the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation has been ongoing. A scoping letter and legal notice in the paper were issued to the public on December 14, 2016, the scoping period ended on January 31, 2017.

The project has been on the Schedule of Proposed Actions on the Forest website since January 2017. The Colville National Forest publishes the SOPA quarterly on the web and sends the document to individuals, groups and industry representatives. The Spokane Tribe submitted comments as did the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation.

The following organizations submitted comments during the scoping period: Alliance for the Wild Rockies, Sierra Club Upper Columbia River Group, WildLands Defense, US Environmental Protection Agency Region 10, American Forest Resource Council, Kettle Range Conservation Group, Northeast Washington Forestry Coalition, and Conservation Northwest. The responsible official and the IDT reviewed public scoping comments and the existing conditions information provided by the IDT. With guidance from the responsible official, the analysis in the Sanpoil EA was focused on the measurement indicators connected to the purpose and need for action.

The draft EA was published for a 30-day comment period starting February 6, 2019 with a legal notice in the Ferry County View. Ten comments were received during the 30-day comment period for the draft EA. Comments were received from the Alliance for the Wild Rockies, American Forest Resource Council, Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation Fish and

Wildlife, Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation Tribal Historic Preservation Officer, Northeast Washington Forest Coalition, Reed Heckly, Sierra Club Upper Columbia River Group, Spokane Tribe Tribal Historic Preservation Officer, Stevens County Commissioners, Stuart Buck, and Washington State Department of Natural Resources. Comment consideration was documented on the letters received from all commenters, and these letters have been included in the project record. We also sent comment response letters to better document consideration of some of the comments received from the American Forest Resource Council, Northeast Washington Forest Coalition, and Jeff Juel on behalf of the Alliance for the Wild Rockies and Sierra Club Upper Columbia River Group. Those response letters are available online at: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=50741>.

The Northeast Washington Forestry Coalition submitted a letter on January 24, 2020 as a follow up to a field visit with the Forest Service on August 13, 2019. The letter focuses on concerns that the Northeast Washington Forestry Coalition has with shaded fuel break treatments. The letter from the Northeast Washington Forestry Coalition, my response, and notes from the August 13, 2019 field trip are all included in the project record.

The final EA, Draft Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact are being published for a 45-day objection period. Additional information about objections received will accompany the final Decision Notice.

## **Consistency with the Forest Plan, Laws, Regulations and Policies**

The selected alternative complies with the LMP. Rationale is as follows:

The selected alternative would be consistent with Forest-wide standards and guidelines found in chapter 2 of the LMP. The selected alternative would also be consistent with standards and guidelines as prescribed in Chapter 3 of the LMP for the following Management Areas:

- Backcountry (LMP pages 99-102).
- Focused Restoration (LMP pages 106-108).
- General Restoration (LMP pages 109-111).
- Research Natural Areas (LMP pages 116-118).
- Riparian Management Areas (LMP pages 119-130).
- Scenic Byways (LMP pages 130-132).
- Wilderness-Recommended (LMP pages 149-153).

The proposed action includes standard practices (EA Appendix B) and design elements (EA pages 27 to 34), which will be fully applied in the selected alternative ensuring consistency with the LMP. The project is feasible and reasonable, and results in meeting the LMP's overall direction of applying quality land management practices under a sustainable multiple-use management concept.

The actions that alter vegetation that are a part of the selected alternative meet the

minimum specific requirements of the National Forest Management Act (NFMA). Rationale is as follows:

- No timber harvest for the purpose of timber management will occur on lands deemed unsuitable for timber production as defined by 36 CFR 219.12(a)(2). In addition to unsuitable land obvious to the eye, particular soil types coupled with plant associations were used to indicate the possibility of unsuitability. Vegetation harvest may occur on these lands for purposes other than timber management, such as fuels reduction.
- All stands with a regeneration prescription would have the ability to be restocked within five years.

## **Finding of No Significant Impact**

### **Context and Intensity**

Context of the environmental effects is based on the environmental analysis in the EA, the specialist reports, and other information in the project record. Intensity is a measure of the severity, extent, or quantity of effects, and is based on information from the effects analysis of the EA and the references in the project record. The agency has taken a hard look at the environmental effects using relevant scientific information and knowledge of site-specific conditions gained from field visits. My finding of no significant impact is based on the context of the project and intensity of effects using the following ten factors identified in 40 CFR 1508.27(b).

**1. Impacts may be both beneficial and adverse. A significant effect may exist even if the Federal agency believes that on the balance the effects will be beneficial.**

Beneficial and adverse impacts were identified and were considered in both context and intensity. In balance, the beneficial effects outweigh the adverse impacts. Both beneficial and adverse impacts are discussed in the specialist reports and Section 3 of the EA. These impacts are within the range of those identified in the LMP, and are consistent with applicable laws, regulation, and policy. The actions will not have significant impacts on the resources identified as described in Section 3 of the EA in either the short or long term.

**2. The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety.**

Potential health and safety hazards include smoke from prescribed fire; dust from increased use of unpaved forest roads; increased traffic on roads within and leading to the project area; logging hazards; and noxious weed treatments. None of these hazards are unusual or unique to this project. Beneficial effects to public health and safety will occur post project implementation and include improved road safety and reduced wildfire risk.

**3. Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.**

The Sanpoil Project includes portions of the Bald Snow recommended wilderness (RW), the Hall Ponds research natural area (RNA), and portions of the Cougar Mountain, Thirteenmile and Bald Snow IRAs. There are no treatments planned within the RW or RNA. Information regarding treatments in IRAs are discussed on pages 7,8, 53 and 54 of the EA, and in the Fuels and Recreation Reports.

The project area also contains threatened or endangered species or their habitat (see factor #9), wetlands, and cultural sites. However, the effects to these resources have been examined in the EA and the specialist reports and there is nothing noted about these features that would suggest that they are unique, or that associated effects would be significant.

The project area contains no other unique characteristics or features. There are no park lands, prime farmlands, wild and scenic rivers, ecologically critical areas, or congressionally designated areas (such as wilderness, wilderness study area, or National Recreation Areas) other than those mentioned above (IRA, RW and RNA).

**4. The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.**

There has been no scientifically backed information presented that disputes a lack of significant impact to the quality of the human environment as disclosed in the Sanpoil Project EA.

**5. The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.**

There were no highly uncertain, unique, or unknown risks identified in any of the effects analyses conducted for the Sanpoil Project.

**6. The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.**

None of the selected actions set precedents. The Republic Ranger District has been implementing timber sales and prescribed burns for years; many of which are similar in scope and nature to those proposed in the Sanpoil Project. Recent examples of commercial thinning and prescribed burning include the Sherman Pass Project, Kettle Face Project, the Walker Project, the East Wedge Project, and the Deer Jasper Project, which have been in various stages of implementation since approximately 2010.



**7. Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.**

Each effects analysis summarized in either the specialist reports or EA discusses cumulative effects; none were found to be significant. See pages 34-56 of the EA or the specialist reports for environmental consequences of the selected alternative by resource area.

**8. The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant cultural or historical resources.**

The effects on cultural or historical resources are discussed in the EA on page 52. The project is covered under the programmatic agreement with the Washington State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO). No sites will be affected (all are to be avoided), so no direct consultation is required. The project is in compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act.

**9. The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act.**

The effects on endangered or threatened species and their habitats is discussed in the Biological Assessment in the project record. Endangered or threatened species which may inhabit the project area will not likely be adversely affected. These include the Canada Lynx (threatened), grizzly bear (threatened), and North American Wolverine (proposed for ESA listing). The selected alternative is expected to have no effect on bull trout. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has concurred with the Biological Assessment's findings (December 20<sup>th</sup> 2018).

**10. Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.**

The Sanpoil Project has been examined in relation to a number of environmental laws and requirements and has been found to be in compliance in all cases. Environmental laws and requirements were discussed on the following pages of the EA and in the specialist reports:

- Clean Water Act (EA page 55 and pages 7, 28, and 29 of the Sanpoil Fisheries/Hydrology Report);
- National Historic Preservation Act (EA page 56 and page 5 of the Heritage Report);

- Endangered Species Act (EA page 55 EA, pages 13 to 24 of the Biological Evaluation for terrestrial wildlife, pages 7 and 28 of Sanpoil Fisheries/Hydrology Report, page 1, 5 and 8 of the Sanpoil Botany Report, and December 20, 2018 USFWS concurrence letter in the project record);
- National Environmental Policy Act (EA and project record);
- National Forest Management Act (EA page 56 and pages 5 and 28 of the Silviculture Report);
- Clean Air Act (EA page 55 and pages 4, 5, 16, 25 and 26 of the Sanpoil Fire, Fuels and Air Quality Report).

There are no known significant irreversible resource commitments or irretrievable losses of timber production, wildlife habitats, soil productivity, or water quality. Consumers, civil rights, minority groups, and women will not be significantly affected by this project. The selected alternative would provide wood products to one or more area sawmills, thus contributing raw materials that would be available to consumers. All contracts and employment offered by the Forest Service contain Equal Employment Opportunity requirements. Therefore, no adverse or discriminatory effects to civil rights, minority groups, or women are expected with regards to access to federal contracts or jobs.

## Conclusion

After considering the environmental effects described in the EA and specialist reports, I have determined that the Proposed Action Alternative will not have significant effects on the quality of the human environment considering the context and intensity of impacts (40 CFR 1508.27). Thus, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared.

## Implementation

I expect to begin implementing this project in the summer of 2021.

## Contact Person

For further information concerning the Sanpoil Project, contact Lisa Larsen at (509) 775-7454, email at [lisa.larsen@usda.gov](mailto:lisa.larsen@usda.gov), or at 650 E Delaware Ave, Republic, WA 99166.

Reserved for signature

---

Travis Fletcher  
District Ranger

In accordance with Federal civil rights law and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) civil rights regulations and policies, the USDA, its Agencies, offices, and employees, and institutions participating in or administering USDA programs are prohibited from discriminating based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, gender identity (including gender expression), sexual orientation, disability, age, marital status, family/parental status, income derived from a public assistance program, political beliefs, or reprisal or retaliation for prior civil rights activity, in any program or activity conducted or funded by USDA (not all bases apply to all programs). Remedies and complaint filing deadlines vary by program or incident.

Persons with disabilities who require alternative means of communication for program information (e.g., Braille, large print, audiotape, American Sign Language, etc.) should contact the responsible Agency or USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TTY) or contact USDA through the Federal Relay Service at (800) 877-8339. Additionally, program information may be made available in languages other than English.

To file a program discrimination complaint, complete the USDA Program Discrimination Complaint Form, AD-3027, found online at [http://www.ascr.usda.gov/complaint\\_filing\\_cust.html](http://www.ascr.usda.gov/complaint_filing_cust.html) and at any USDA office or write a letter addressed to USDA and provide in the letter all of the information requested in the form. To request a copy of the complaint form, call (866) 632-9992. Submit your completed form or letter to USDA by: (1) mail: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, D.C. 20250-9410; (2) fax: (202) 690-7442; or (3) email: [program.intake@usda.gov](mailto:program.intake@usda.gov).

USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer and lender.